

Praise for a principled politician

Imagine this. People standing up, one after another, to praise a congressman. You can't imagine it, especially on this Primary Day. But it happened Saturday in White Plains.

People who worked on the staff of Richard Ottinger when he was in Congress between 1964 and 1984 came from all over the country to mark the 30th anniversary of his first election. Why?

"It was one of the most exhilarating experiences of my life" to work for him, said Terry Kelly, now with Metro-North Railroad. "He's one of the most principled men I've ever met." Over and over, I heard that: "He had the courage to tell the truth." "He stood for something when he ran for office." "Dick had a set of values and beliefs."

The idea for the gathering was born after Ottinger himself had gone to a reunion of his congressional class of '74, the "Watergate class." Though Ottinger had first gone to Congress in 1964, when he was elected from the Hudson side of Westchester, he left the House in 1970 to run for the Senate. He lost that race, as well as a '72 bid for his old House seat. In '74 he ran for the House again, that time from the Sound shore side. He won and stayed till 1984, when he said he had had enough. He has been a professor of law and is now dean at Pace University School of Law.

'I owe it all to Richard'

At the congressional reunion, everyone spoke briefly about his or her life now. So at the end of dinner at his staff reunion, Ottinger said: "I thought it would be nice if everybody would take one minute to say what they're doing now." The first few did just that. Then Eve Widdows, who has retired as chief clerk of courts in Westchester County, said, "I owe it all to Richard L. Ottinger — what I learned."

Ginny Monahan, executive assistant to the supervisor of Ossining, said, "He gave so many women the opportunity to do what they could do." Several men in the room agreed: Ottinger was one of



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the first public officials to give women a chance to be something other than a secretary.

Bill Randolph, a Mount Vernon City Council member, expanded on that.

"He instilled in all of us ... a sense of idealism, a sense of values," Randolph said. "Dick deserves extraordinary credit as a trailblazer. I grew up in Westchester. There were very few officials who gave African-Americans and other minorities a chance in their offices. There still aren't." Randolph's voice cracked, and he wiped tears from his eyes. "It meant a lot to me — and to my people."

Len Simon, who said he was 15 when he first went to work for Ottinger in Yonkers, made a telling point. "Kids did politics then," Simon said. "If we hung out at the mall, it was to hand out literature for Dick's campaign. ... We made friendships for a lifetime." Marriages, too, as others pointed out.

'He defined politics'

Jay Hashmall, a Somers councilman and lawyer in White Plains, was 12 when he started working for Ottinger.

"He defined politics for the Woodstock generation," Hashmall said. "There's never been anybody like him since. ... I owe everything that I hold dear in politics to Dick Ottinger."

Clearly the 55 who were able to come and the others who wrote remember Ottinger fondly. But what's extraordinary, said Teri Waivada of Garrison, "as we look at the political climate today, is we kept our beliefs." Even unto the next generation. Ottinger's son, Larry, said he first thought being a congressman meant handing out your picture on street corners, then summed it up for them all: "My desire to do social change work came directly from you."

Nancy Q. Keefe's opinion column appears Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday. To offer your opinion in return, call her at 694-5097.